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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether instruction in how to use a dictionary led to improved second language performance and greater dictionary use among English majors (N=54) in a reading and writing course at a Thai university. One of three participating classes was instructed in the use of a monolingual learner's dictionary. A passage correction test administered before and after the instruction was used to assess instructional effectiveness. The amount and type of dictionary use on the course's final exam measured whether the instruction led to greater use of monolingual dictionaries. Results showed significant improvement on the passage correction test for the class receiving instruction in dictionary use, but none for the other classes. Also, the same class used monolingual dictionaries much more on the final exam. (MSE)

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Dictionaries Can Help Writing - If Students Know How To Use Them

Abstract

Dictionaries have been advocated as an important aid to learners of new languages. The study reported here specifically looked at monolingual learner's dictionaries. The study investigated whether instruction in dictionary use led to improved second language performance and greater dictionary use among university students in northern Thailand.

Three classes enrolled in the same course participated in the research. Only one class received instruction in the use of a monolingual learner's dictionary. A passage correction test, given to each class before and after this treatment, was used to measure whether the instruction was effective or not. Further, amount and kind of dictionary use on the course's final exam was used to measure whether the instruction led to greater use of monolingual dictionaries.

Results showed significant improvement on the passage correction test for the class which received instruction in dictionary use, but none for the other classes. Also, the same class used monolingual dictionaries much more on the

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final exam than did the classes which received no instruction in dictionary use.

The idea that dictionaries are vital tools for writers is a commonplace one. For people writing in a second/foreign language, the help that dictionaries can provide seems especially important. Thus, it comes as no surprise that many articles and books recommend dictionaries to people learning English (Marckwardt, 1973; Underhill, 1980; Huang, 1985; Rossner, 1985; Burridge & Adam, undated).

To make the benefits of a dictionary more accessible to nonnative speakers of English, today there are a number of dictionaries, called monolingual learner's dictionaries (MLDs), written especially for learners of English (e.g., Hornby, 1974; Proctor, 1978; Kirkpatrick, 1980). A careful reading of the introduction to any MLD will reveal many ways that it can help with writing. Also, there are books (Whitcut, 1979; Underhill, 1980) written especially to teach learners how to use MLDs to the fullest extent.

If writing is seen as a process involving recursive dimensions in which ideas are formed, shaped into a piece of writing, and the writing checked for errors (Zamel, 1982; Spack, 1984; Hartfiel, Hughey, Wormuth, & Jacobs, 1985), dictionaries would seem to be most useful in the checking,

proofreading dimension of the process. When proofreading, writers use their knowledge of language to check what they have written for errors in form.

When proofreading, dictionaries can be useful only in certain situations. When students see that they have written a language item that their current L2 (second language) competence tells them is wrong, and they feel they know how to correct it, a dictionary is not needed. Also, when students have written an item which is wrong, but is acceptable according to their current L2 competence, it may not occur to them to check in a dictionary. Dictionaries can be useful either when learners do not know how to correct an item which they believe is wrong or when they are not sure if an item is correct, and they want to check it.

While many authors have called for greater use of MLDs by L2 learners, and there is good reason to believe such use would be beneficial, no studies were found which empirically investigated this issue. The purpose of the study reported in this paper was to investigate the effects of training in MLD use of the performance of second language learners.

Hypotheses

Two hypotheses were tested in this study:

1. Students trained in the use of an MLD would be better able to find and correct errors in a passsage than learners without dictionaries or without training in their use.

2. Students trained in the use of an MLD would use an MLD more when writing.

Subjects

The fifty-four subjects in this study were all third-year English majors at Chiang Mai University in Chiang Mai, Thailand. They were enrolled in three sections of a writing/reading course and were of generally intermediate ability. These sections were designated A, B, and C. The course met twice a week. The researcher and other lecturers had observed that the large majority of students used no dictionaries or only small bilingual ones. The same observation had been made elsewhere in Thailand (Nilrat, Wongwiwat, and Shettlesworth, 1986).

The Study

A pretest posttest design was used with a control group and two different experimental groups. All subjects took the same passage correction test twice. In a passage correction test, the directions are to find and correct errors in a passage produced by the tester. Whereas Odlin (1985), in an

effort to obtain precise scoring, designated the number of errors to be corrected in the passage in his directions to students, it was not done in this study because when students are checking their own writing, they do not know how many errors to look for.

The passage correction test used in the research was constructed by using errors and ideas found in other students' compositions on the same topic: how a friend has changed since coming to the university. There were fourteen errors in the passage, falling into five categories: 1) part of speech, 2) spelling, 3) two-word verbs, 4) idioms, and 5) noun-preposition combinations. An example from the test is, "Soon, no one wanted to talk to her; they just said hello to her and passed away." (The error here is on the two-word verb passed away.) The correct form for all the errors could be found in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (ALD).

On the pretest, no dictionaries were allowed. In the following six weeks, only section C received instruction in the use of a dictionary, the ALD. This instruction included the teacher circling and writing a D, for dictionary, when errors were found in writing assignments for which the ALD provided an accessible correction, and explaining, demonstrating, and practicing the use of the features of the

ALD which are relevant to writing. None of the incorrect items on the passage correction test used in the research were included in the dictionary practice.

Section C was the only section to receive this treatment. The other two sections, A and B, received only the normal detailed correction of composition errors, without instruction in dictionary use. On the posttest, six weeks later, section A, as on the pretest, did not use a dictionary, but this time sections B and C used the ALD.

Also, for the course's final exam, which took place after the posttest, students had three hours to write a three paragraph composition to be accompanied by an outline. Dictionaries were optional. The researcher observed how many students brought dictionaries and what kind they brought.

Scoring

The passage correction tests were scored for the incorrect items that subjects found, for their corrections of those items, for the correct items which subjects inaccurately identified as incorrect, and for their corrections of those items. Scoring was done in negative numbers. Thus, lower scores indicate better performance. If an errors was not found, one point was deducted. One point was subtracted for inaccurately identifying a correct item as

incorrect, and another point was deducted if the correction was not acceptable in the context of the passage. Scoring was done by a professional English teacher and checked by a paid colleague. Any disagreements were decided by a third colleague who was also paid.

Analyses

The Wilcoxon Matched-Pairs Signed-Ranks Test (Wilcoxon, 1949) was used to determine if there were any significant differences between pretest and posttest scores for each section. To measure whether instruction in utilizing a dictionary led to greater use of MLDs, it was recorded for each section how many students brought dictionaries to the final exam for the course, and which type, bilingual or monolingual learner's, they brought.

Results

Table 1 shows the scores for each secton on the pretest and posttest.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE PLEASE]

Table 2 shows the results of the Wilcoxon Matched-Pairs Signed-Ranks Test for each section. No significant change between the first and second administrations of the passage correction test was found for the two sections, A and B,

which did not receive instruction in dictionary use. Section B had dictionaries for the posttest, but A did not. However, as hypothesized, section C, which both received instruction in dictionary use and had dictionaries for the posttest, demonstrated significant improvement. ($T=0$, $N=19$, $p<.01$).

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE PLEASE]

The second hypothesis predicted that instruction in dictionary use would increase the number of students who used MLDs. Table 3 shows that this was confirmed. In section A, no students brought MLDs to the final exam, 60% brought bilingual dictionaries, and 40% brought no dictionary at all. In section B, only 29% had MLDs, and 46% had no dictionary. In contrast, in section C, 79% brought MLDs. Nevertheless, the other 21% had no dictionary.

[INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE PLEASE]

Discussion

The findings of this study seem to indicate that training in the use of an MLD can lead to both better writing and greater MLD use. In the section which received instruction on the ALD, all the students' posttest scores were at least a little better than their pretest scores. In the other two sections, while the majority of students'

scores improved, the change was not significant. It should also be noted that despite their improvement, section C students were still unable to find and correct many errors.

One objection which could be raised to the design of the study is that the instruction in dictionary use might have sensitized subjects about what kinds of errors to look for. However, many other error types besides those on the research instrument were covered in the class, and in all sections, teachers were marking students' compositions for errors of the types on the instrument as well as others. Nevertheless, perhaps an alternative design could have the other two sections receive a special treatment using a technique other than dictionary use.

The result concerning dictionary use on the final exam, while an informal measure, is striking. There may have been, however, one factor other than increased skill and confidence in using an MLD that led so many more students in section C to bring an MLD to the final exam. That is that some purchased an MLD especially because their teacher was using it in class. Thus, they had one or found access to one, while students in the other sections may not have. At the same time, if the treatment encouraged students to find access to an MLD, that in itself seems a worthwhile outcome, and the fact that they brought it to the final exam shows

their faith in its value.

Conclusion

There is a large amount of information in a dictionary. Even a native speaker professor of English and Linguistics at Princeton University wrote that, "it is a constant source of surprise to find how much information about the language is available to the person who is thoroughly at home in this linguistic resource, is experienced in searching out information he needs and is knowledgeable and sophisticated in interpreting what he finds" (Marckwardt, 1973).

Of course, not all this information is essential to people learning a new language. Nor does a dictionary have all the information language learners will need. Nevertheless, the research presented here supports the belief that with help as to how and when to use dictionaries, students can come to use them more skillfully and more often.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Scores on the Pretest and Posttest by Section

		Pretest		Posttest	
Section	n	x	s	x	s
A	17	31.65	7.12	29.12	6.68
B	18	33.83	5.40	30.60	6.49
C	19	35.84	7.45	25.37	7.69

Table 2

Results of Wilcoxon Matched-Pairs Signed-Ranks Test Comparing Pretest and Posttest Scores for Each Section

Section	n	T
A	17	47.5
B	18	40.5
C	19	0 *

*=difference significant at .01

Table 3

Dictionary Use on Final Exam in Percentages

Section	No Dictionary	Bilingual Only	Monolingual Only	Both	Total
A	40	60	0	0	100
B	46	25	21	8	100
C	21	0	42	37	100

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